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ABSTRACT

Rural school districts where ethnocentrism, traditionalism, primary group preference, and social conservatism form the dominant value system could be contributing to their own ineffectiveness through their patterns of personnel selection. This study investigated the influence of rural values on components of personnel selection and the tacit filters of "fit" in recruitment efforts in Kentucky school districts. Surveys completed by 176 Kentucky school district superintendents and 178 principals indicate that decisionmakers with higher levels of rural values were more likely to rely upon "matching" or fit factors when making hiring decisions. Objective factors, such as references, grade point average, leadership activities, and honors or awards, did not play a significant role in influencing the hiring decisions of administrators with rural values. Decisionmakers with rural values did not perceive the importance of having minority faculty representation in proportion to the student population, even though they strongly agreed that students relate better to teachers with similar value systems. Decisionmakers with rural values perceived "fit" as a prerequisite to employment, and applicant background was a key element in determining that fit. Therefore, local candidates seemed to be among the few applicants who could meet the stringent "similar background" test. The perception that values matched, more than the actual matching of values, influenced the employment decision. (Contains 38 references.) (TD)

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RURAL VALUES AND SCHOOL DISTRICT PERSONNEL PRACTICES: AN EXPLORATION OF PERSON-ORGANIZATION FIT THEORY

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Paper presented at the American Educational Research Association
Annual Meeting
April 10-14, 2001, Seattle

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RURAL VALUES AND SCHOOL DISTRICT PERSONNEL PRACTICES: AN EXPLORATION OF PERSON-ORGANIZATION FIT THEORY

Introduction

The overall effectiveness of any organization is predicated, at least to some degree, on the quality of its personnel. Educational organizations, in particular, require quality personnel to influence student development and produce high levels of achievement. Surprisingly, though, many school districts lack a structured and systematic means for identifying and selecting certified employees. Because hiring decisions are so critical to the success of a school district, one would think that a great deal of research has been conducted to illuminate the process. While research abounds on hiring practices for business and human resource professionals (Athey & Hautaluoma, 1994; Gibbs & Riggs, 1994; Goza & Lau, 1992; Schmitt & Robertson, 1990; Stone, 1994; Treece, 1989; Tschirgi, 1973; Weslowski & Feild, 1987), scant evidence exists to document personnel selection within the educational realm.

Understanding hiring practices in the educational system is important because quality education first requires quality educators. Many studies have been designed to identify teacher characteristics that lead to high levels of student learning (Brunkhorst, 1992; Chidolue, 1996; Leinhardt & Green, 1986). Such research, however, ignores one key possibility: What are the consequences if the most effective teachers never make it into the classroom? Calls for educational reform frequently urge increased efforts in both recruitment to, and retention in, teacher education (Kerr, 1983). No matter how well prepared teaching candidates may be, they can have no effect until they are actually

employed. Could certain school districts be languishing perpetually behind in student achievement and school effectiveness because of the criteria they are using when hiring teachers?

Because public education is exclusively a state function, the state must set the criteria for eligibility, qualification, and certification of teachers. Thus, in the field of education, personnel selection is regulated by a series of statutes at the state level. To regulate an acceptable level of competence in educators throughout the state of Kentucky, KRS 161.130 provides for all teachers to be certified by completing a program licensed by the Education Professional Standards Board. Similarly, policies exist to place responsibility for making hiring decisions:

> The superintendent shall...be responsible for all personnel actions including hiring, assignments, transfer, dismissal, suspension, reinstatement, promotion, and demotion and reporting the actions to the local board. (KRS 160.390)

In Kentucky districts where school self-governance is active, that responsibility also falls upon school-based decision-making councils. State legislatures have delegated the authority for more specific policy-making regarding the employment of teachers to local school boards, who have been given wide latitude so long as their regulations neither contradict nor reduce the effects of existing regulations. Local school board policies concerning personnel selection, for the most part, mirror exactly the federal and state laws and offer nothing more.

Beyond this framework, however, no official, written policies exist to delineate which individuals, all equally certified, deserve employment and which do not. To fill this void, it is hypothesized that educators often select those applicants whom they perceive as

being most likely to fit with the pre-existing value system. Thus, it is conceivable that certain school districts, in hiring individuals who best fit with their community and organization, may be subverting efforts to employ the most proficient teachers by selecting, instead, the most harmonious. Furthermore, attempts to employ individuals who appear to fit into the system as it currently exists may, rather than improving school district health and efficacy, be contributing to a tepid state of ineffectual existence.

Hiring officials who harbor rural values such as ethnocentrism, traditionalism, primary group preference, and social conservatism would seem especially susceptible to hiring individuals who are known entities. In rural school districts, it is not unusual, in the experience of the first author, to find entire school faculties comprised of individuals born and raised in the community. Often more than one generation of a family will be represented on the same faculty. Given this reality, it is not irrational to believe that the tendency to select personnel who appear to fit into the existing system, as well as ones who fit with the rural values preference of the decision-maker, may be partially responsible for the stagnation often seen in rural school districts.

Rural Influence

According to Brown, Rix, and Cholvat (1983), personnel decisions are merely the hunches, notions, thoughts, or perceptions of one individual about another. If this is so, given the lack of criteria to assist in choosing one certified teacher over another, superintendents and other hiring officials are relying upon personal perceptions and value judgments to determine the best teachers to employ. Clearly, values play a key role in influencing the decisions individuals make. Observation and experience suggest that school districts located in rural communities have faculties which mirror the

community's cultural composition. Certainly, political gamesmanship could affect this truth, but, given the enormity of the trend, much more is most likely at play. It is entirely possible that decision-makers are hiring individuals already familiar with their school or community because they feel that having an employee who fits into their value system is their most important consideration--more important even than instructional skill or cognitive ability.

Findings in the field of rural education document that incongruities do exist between the personnel of rural and urban areas. Statistics describing rural educators show that certified personnel in rural areas tend to be less educated and have less experience than their urban counterparts (United States Department of Education, 1994). It is not illogical to reason that differences in hiring practices could help account, at least partially, for the disparity in personnel quality that currently exists between rural and urban schools. According to Ciscell (1989), rural districts are populated mainly by employees with similar rural backgrounds and psychology, and the trend seems destined to continue.

According to Schneider (1987), the tendency for organizations to become homogenous with regard to person types has a deleterious effect for organizational efficacy. Hiring individuals who fit into an already culturally homogenous community, though meant to bring harmony and smooth transitions, can diminish perspective and lead to stultification. Thus, it is conceivable that certain school districts, caught in a values-based cycle of similarity, could be contributing to their own ineffectiveness through their patterns of personnel selection. School districts where rural values form the dominant value system would seem most likely to be trapped in this cycle, given the

prominence of ethnocentrism, traditionalism, primary group preference, and social conservation as strong rural values.

Surprisingly, though the investigation of issues affecting rural education has gained extensive momentum in recent decades, the influence of rural values on personnel selection practices has rarely been studied. Past studies which have attempted to determine a difference in employment procedures between rural and urban school districts (e.g., Little, 1995), though providing valuable additions to the knowledge base, have been limited by accepting the U.S. Census Bureau's definition of rural. Believing that any decision, much less one dealing with personnel selection, could be influenced by lines drawn on a map or mere geographic location is a far too simplistic explanation. It is the importance that individuals attach to values that influences a wide variety of behavioral and decision-making choices (Johannesen, 1983).

Rurality, then, is more than geography, it is a set of values--values which one might find in a variety of locations. Acknowledging the importance values play in decision-making, various researchers have examined the influence of both personal values and organizational values on employment decisions. Given the highly complex nature of decision-making, however, the narrow focus of these studies is inadequate, for hiring officials must surely consider both organizational and personal values when making decisions. Just exactly which combination of personal and organizational variables allow for rural values to flourish? To this point, the answer has not yet been determined, yet given the clear influence of values on decision-making, the question is of great consequence. It also seems logical to assume that hiring officials who possess rural values might desire different characteristics in employees than those hiring officials who

maintain a more cosmopolitan outlook. Just exactly what, however, are those differences? How do the differing value systems affect hiring preferences, perceptions, and recruitment practices?

Theoretical Perspective

Prominent theorists in the field of interactional psychology (e.g., Bowers, 1973) have for years promoted the study of behavior and decision-making as an interplay between personal and situational characteristics. The interactionist approach led to the formation of the theory of person-environment fit, which stresses the reciprocal nature of the relationship of people to their situation and the resulting consequences on their behavior (Bodenman, 1995). In simple terms, this theory suggests that individuals are more likely to be more comfortable in and, therefore, choose environments that reflect their own values.

Organizational scholars seized upon the idea of person-environment fit and expanded it to include behavior from the organizational perspective (e.g. Chatman, 1991; Judge & Bretz, 1992). It is the theory of person-organization fit, which seeks to explain the predominance of the match between organizational and employee traits, values, and beliefs, in which this study is grounded. Solid research has been conducted to confirm not only that person-organization fit exists, but that it affects decision-making.

Perhaps most critical for the advancement of this study is the support of research showing the perception of fit to be more significant than the existence of actual fit on personnel selection (Cable, 1995). Given this fact, it is not irrational to hypothesize that hiring officials in school districts are using perceptions of fit to determine which teachers to hire. It is, to continue the line of reasoning, also not unlikely that hiring officials'

preferences, perceptions, and recruitment practices are influenced by rural values, given the fact that values constitute the basis for determining fit (Bodenman, 1995). The influence of fit on personnel selection decisions might also be hypothesized to be extraordinarily high in school districts with rural values, given the prominence of certain rural values.

Conceptual Model

The following conceptual model was designed to provide a framework for viewing tacit influences on personnel selection practices, and, ultimately, employment decisions. Structured to take into account the influence of both organizational and personal level variables on rural values and hiring officials, this model is depicted in Figure 1. In general, the model suggests that there are three main components of personnel selection--credentials preferences, district hiring perceptions, and recruitment--that remain the same across school districts, regardless of procedures. These three components together function as a set of preliminary filters in determining which applications make it through the hiring process.

The first of the three components, Credential Preferences, represents underlying attitudes of hiring officials regarding a set of qualities that teachers should possess. The qualities themselves can be thought of as objective indices of teacher credentials. The second component is District Hiring Perceptions. Here the emphasis is on district hiring officials' sense of their own roles and responsibilities in employment selection, i.e., what do these decision makers deem important regarding the type of person to be hired and the compatibility of that person with the district. These District Hiring Perceptions, in effect, represent a conception of their district and what is needed to maintain that district's sense

of place. Finally, the third component is Recruitment Efforts. The indicators of this component are examples of actual recruiting strategi- s and tactics. They constitute policies and behaviors that correspond to the values implicit in the Credentials Preferences and District Hiring Perceptions components.

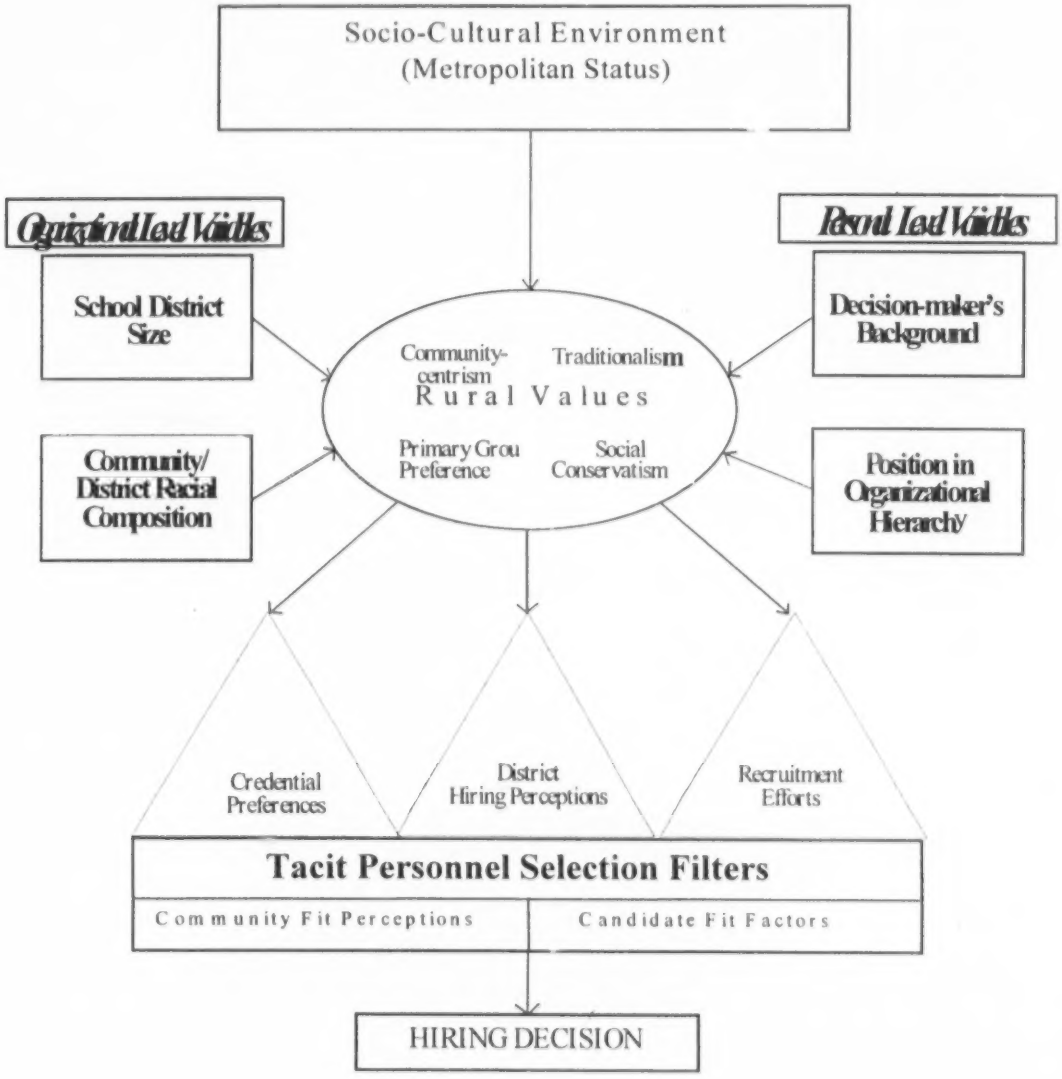

Figure 1. Rural values and the Person-Organization Fit model: Mediating effects on tacit personnel selection filters.

The model indicates a second layer in the personnel selection practices. The three components of personnel selection operate through a final screen, implicit or tacit in nature: how well do applicants "fit" into the existing organizational structure? The model suggests that individuals (teacher candidates) who satisfy or meet "fit requirements" are most likely to attain employment. These are two aspects of this fit. The first is Community Fit Perceptions. These are the perceptions of the hiring officials regarding the importance of the "match" between the district and the teacher candidate. Officials who have a greater sense of Community Fit Perceptions would likely be more stringent in screening for employees who mirror the districts' values and identity. The emphasis is on obtaining employees whose background is similar to the districts'.

The second aspect is Candidate Fit Factors. As opposed to Community Fit Perceptions (decision makers' valuing of compatibility in the hiring process), Candidate Fit Factors constitute an assessment of the extent that applicants actually are compatible. These are the "intangible" qualifications of an individual; they operate in a local network: do the teacher candidates actually possesses the "fit" factors that will enable them to "blend" in, to be "at home," to be an "insider," to "relate" to students and community.

The model as a whole postulates that hiring officials with stronger rural values are more likely to ascribe to personnel practices that represent idiosyncratic fit (need to match employees to prevailing local conditions) as opposed to universal fit (trying to find the superior candidate, regardless of background). Thus, central to the entire model is the set of rural values which act as a mediating variable. These rural values themselves are the product of socio-community factors, in this model the Organizational Level Variables and the Personal Level Variables. The model hypothesizes that the background

organizational and demographic factors have an indirect influence through the rural values that reflect or "mediate" these conditions. As rural values are more strongly held, hiring officials' salience and intensity for idiosyncratic fit is likely to increase.

Research Questions

The aim of this study was to investigate the influence of rural values on the components of personnel selection and the tacit filters of "fit" in recruitment efforts in Kentucky school districts, providing empirical evidence and insight into a largely unexamined arena. Very little is known about the hiring practices of organizations, particularly for entry level positions (Bowes Fremont-Smith, 1984). In the field of education, even less is known about the reasoning behind hiring decisions which result in employment for some aspiring teachers and rejection for others. Traditional beliefs and human capital theories have propounded notions that individuals are hired based upon objective qualifications. In reality, however, there is little evidence that verifies the selection of personnel based upon objective criteria. Bowes Fremont-Smith postulates in her study that the entire hiring process acts as a rampart, screening out those individuals who are not perceived to fit with organizational norms.

Word of mouth and personal networks become the chief methods of establishing fit and, ultimately, influencing hiring decisions. If perceptions of fit are more important than actual fit in determining organizational entry (Cable, 1995), it is logical to assume that hiring officials could be using applicant background as an indication of value similarity and fit. If so, the implications of such behavior have tremendous ramifications for educators. Clearly, selecting personnel by these methods could result in the hiring of less objectively qualified personnel, the maintenance of low minority employment, and

the perpetuation of a homogenized faculty.

The practice of giving hiring preference to those individuals with established ties to school or community is so ingrained as to be common knowledge to most hiring officials in Kentucky rural school districts. Because such an attitude does not jibe with current perceptions of political correctness, however, it is not widely trumpeted nor usually even openly admitted. The presence of rural values may well be the deciding factor in determining the hiring preferences of school district officials, whose values not only convince them to choose known entities, but whose perceptions of fit may do likewise. It may also be the case that those individuals making the hiring decisions who have personal experience limited to a monocultural setting may be unaware of their own feelings and reactions to cultural diversity (DeSensi, 1995), rationalizing their decisions by emphasizing other motives. Whatever the case, the fact remains that inhabitation of rural school districts by personnel with similar rural backgrounds is an area ripe for investigation.

The conceptual model described above and the lack of empirical research in this area, particularly in rural school districts, set up the following research questions:

1. To what extent do rural values affect the perceptual and logistic components of school district personnel selection practices in terms of:
    a. Credential Preferences?
    b. District Hiring Perceptions?
    c. Recruitment Efforts?
2. To what extent do rural values affect school district personnel

selection filters at the tacit level in terms of:

a. Community Fit Perceptions?

b. Candidate Fit Factors?

Methods

In order to pinpoint the influence of rural values and demographic data on personnel selection practices, this study used survey research to identify attributes of a sample. The credential preferences, district hiring perceptions, and recruitment efforts of hiring officials, as well as their tacit personnel selection filters, were determined by survey responses, while their rural values were determined by their responses to a scale included as the final pages of the survey instrument. The authors used mail procedures to distribute the instrument to the hiring officials of the identified Kentucky public school districts.

Sources of Data

The data used for this study were obtained from a sample of personnel decision-makers in Kentucky public school districts. With only 176 public school districts in Kentucky, each superintendent was mailed a survey. In addition, principals function as chairpersons of school-based decision-making councils; thus a proportional random sample of 15% of the principals was surveyed, selected from each of the 1,189 Kentucky schools implementing school-based decision-making, with each school district having a minimum of one principal chosen. The sample was chosen from a list of all schools implementing school-based decision-making supplied by the Kentucky Department of Education. The Kentucky Schools Directory was used to gain access to relevant mailing information. It lists all public school districts across Kentucky, provides addresses of

central offices and individual schools, gives names of current superintendents and principals, and classifies each district according to size. The sample included a total of 354 individuals, with surveys sent to 176 superintendents, or their designees who select personnel, and 178 principals in the capacity of school-based decision-making council chairpersons.

Survey Design

A questionnaire was developed and piloted in an effort to identify the effect of rural values on personnel selection practices in Kentucky public school districts. (A copy of the questionnaire can be found in Little, 1998, Appendix A.) The questionnaire consists of four sections: personnel selection preferences, perceptions, recruitment efforts, and demographic information. In the first section, respondents are asked to review a list of fifteen hiring criteria and indicate the extent to which they feel the factors are important in making selection decisions. The fifteen items purporting to measure the relative importance of various hiring preferences are anchored to a 5-point Likert scale ranging from not important to extremely important. The ten statements dealing with perceptions in the second section of the survey are tied to a 5-point Likert scale ranging from strongly disagree to strongly agree. In the third section of the survey, respondents are asked to describe the recruitment methods they currently use, if any. The final section of the survey is devoted to determining demographic information about the decision-maker. All questions are closed-ended.

Item construction was based on the literature and the results of previous research by the senior author. Several items in the first section of the survey, as well as all those in the second section were based upon the results of in-depth interviews conducted with six

decision-makers from three rural school districts (Little, 1996). The results of those interviews conducted in March and April of 1996 yielded valuable information about the importance of community pressure and the differing perceptions of roles and responsibilities among hiring officials. The interviews also showed the heavy reliance upon fit factors in personnel selection, while providing quality evidence regarding the exact elements constituting fit. (See Variables in the Study, below, for an explanation of the different questionnaire items, operational definitions, and where they can be located.)

The self-administered survey was prepared in accordance with Fowler's (1993) six principles; the self-administered design was self-explanatory, restricted to closed answers, laid out in a clear manner, void of skip questions, highly informative, and contained few questions. There is evidence that having respondents answer questions in a self-administered form may produce less social desirability bias for some items (Fowler). Since personnel selection can be a highly charged topic for educators, the self-administered form removes some doubt that the respondent is answering as he/she does only to look good to an interviewer.

The developed questionnaire was subjected to critical analysis by a panel of colleagues. As a result of that analysis, the instrument was refined slightly. The questionnaire was then piloted using a sample of 12 current school administrators from school districts in Tennessee and Kentucky. The group participating in the field testing consisted of three superintendents and nine principals; ten of the individuals were from a rural school district, while two were from an urban district. Because this study utilized the entire population of school superintendents in Kentucky, it was necessary to use superintendents from Tennessee in the pilot phase, although the principals, who were not

included in the study sampling, were from Kentucky. The instrument was found to have face validity. Additionally, responses were varied and social desirability was not found to be a concern. Based upon comments written in the margins and personal and telephone conversations with individuals participating in the pilot study, a few additional refinements were made, resulting in the final version of the instrument.

The Rural Values Scale used in this study was developed after an exhaustive search of the literature and utilizes items adapted from already extant instruments. The scale was designed to be self-administered and self-explanatory. All directions are found on the first page of the scale, which takes approximately five minutes to complete. The main reason for this scale was to test the relationship of specific value orientations to personnel selection practices. Obviously, the range of value orientations which might affect the actions of decision-makers is almost infinite. The four variables comprising this scale--ethnocentrism, traditionalism, primary group preference, and social conservatism--were selected as being among the most likely to be important based upon the literature review and personal experience of the senior author.

Extensive instrument development resulted in the four value scales which have textbook quality in terms of psychometric qualities--four scales with 10 items each, all with Cronbach's alpha of about .92. For details of the development and validation procedures, see Little (1998). For the current study, the four separate scales are combined into a Rural Values Scale which has an overall alpha of .95, more than adequate for the purpose of examining district selection practices.

Variables in the Study

For Rural Values Little (1998, Appendix F) contains an item map associating specific

Rural Values survey questions with the variables they represent. For each of the remaining six sections of variables (including Demographics), Little (1998, Appendices C and D) contains an item map associating specific questionnaire items with the variables they represent and scoring guide/operational definitions, respectively. The variables in Little (1998) have been relabeled here consistent with Figure 1 above.

Rural Values Variables

> Community-centrism (COM): Ethnocentrism is the attitude or tendency of people to view their own race, religion, culture, or group as superior to others and to judge others on that basis. For this study, ethnocentrism was narrowed to community superiority. Community-centric individuals would, for example, feel secure in believing their community values were superior to the remainder of the world's.
>
> Traditionalism (TRA) was the sense of clinging to an earlier heritage. It involved heavy resistance to change. An example of traditionalism would be avoiding changing an educational program until it was mandated. An individual possessing traditional values would believe that the conventional way of accomplishing goals was always preferable.
>
> Primary Group Preference (PGP) focused on the meeting of associational needs by primary type contacts with family and neighbors. An individual who rarely attends meetings where he/she knows few people and who discusses school district plans with family members before colleagues exhibits characteristics of primary group preference.
>
> Social Conservatism (SC) entailed a discomfort with different races, religions, classes, and other forms of humanity, as well as a preference for a strong, central authority. A social conservative, for example, would have difficulty relating to persons of either a much higher or a much lower social class. He/she would have few friends of a different race and feel that special interest groups have gone too far in demanding their rights.

Credential Preference Variables

These variables measure the degree of importance that school district hiring officials place upon certain qualities possessed by teaching applicants. In other words, it indicates their preferences about the type of qualifications a candidate possesses. The items in this

set are generally objective comparisons and could be thought of as important in "universal fit" with respect to credentials.

References (REF) was the importance a hiring official placed upon the references listed on a job application.

Previous Employment Experience Outside the District (EXPO) referred to the importance hiring officials placed upon an applicant's work experience gained under other employers.

Grade Point Average (GPA) was the level of significance hiring officials attached to an applicant's academic standing.

Level of Educational Attainment (EDU) was the importance hiring officials placed upon the extent of an applicant's educational credentials.

Multiple Certification (CER) focused on how important hiring officials felt it was for applicants to possess teaching certification in more than one field.

Involvement in Leadership Activities (LEAD) was the extent to which hiring officials felt it important for applicants to have leadership experience.

Previous Honors and Awards (HON) measured the degree to which hiring officials valued applicant honors and awards.

Sponsor (SPON) focused on the level of significance placed by hiring officials on an applicant's intention to sponsor or coach extracurricular activities.

District Hiring Perception Variables

These variables measure the perceptions school district hiring officials hold about their own roles and responsibilities in hiring. They represent the hiring officials' perceptions of certain applicant qualities and community pressures, and the importance of protecting mores by matching applicants to local values.

Projected Length of Employment (LENGTH) measured whether hiring officials felt stability was more important than ability in a teaching candidate. In other words, would he/she rather hire an exceptional employee who might only remain a short while, or an average employee who would remain indefinitely?

Racial Diversity (RACDIV) measured hiring officials' perceptions about their responsibility to promote racial diversity through hiring practices.

Community Norms (NORMS) focused upon the extent to which hiring officials considered it their duty to consider community norms when selecting personnel.

Intelligence (INTEL) measured the degree to which hiring officials perceived that highly intelligent teachers have difficulty in relating to average students.

Minority Representation (MINOR) measured hiring officials' perceptions about the extent of minority representation on faculties compared to the percentage of overall minority population in a community.

Hand-Delivery (HAND) focused upon the extent to which hiring officials believed hand-delivered job applications to be preferable to mailed ones.

Recruitment Efforts Variables

These variables measure the utilization of the following specified recruitment practices by school districts:

Special Incentive Packages (INCEN)

Out-of-District Position Advertising (ADVER)

Public Relations Materials (PUBREL)

Sending Recruiters to Colleges or Employment Fairs (RECRUIT)

Other (OTHER)

None (NONE)

Community Fit Perception Variables

The following variables measure hiring officials' perceptions of the role of fit in the hiring process:

Background (SIMBAC) referred to the perception by hiring officials that coworkers who share a similar background work better together.

Screening (SCREEN) measured hiring officials' attitudes that screening procedures for selecting personnel should be designed to keep out candidates whose attitudes/values did not match those prominent in the school district.

Values (SIMVAL) measured the degree to which hiring officials perceive that

students relate better to teachers who share a background and values similar to their own.

Fit (FIT) measured the perception by hiring officials that it is important to select personnel who will fit into a community or school district.

Candidate Fit Factor Variables

These variables measure the extent to which hiring officials deem it important for candidates to possess various fit factors. Candidate Fit Factors are those indicators that bespeak a high degree of applicant fit with the organization or community.

Previous Employment Experience Inside the District (EXPI) measured the extent to which hiring officials valued an applicant's having prior work experience in the same setting.

Familiarity with the Local School District or Community (FAM) focused upon the degree to which hiring officials considered an applicant's familiarity with the community or school district a significant factor when selecting personnel.

Intention of the Applicant to Reside within the District (INT) referred to how important hiring officials felt it was for a prospective teacher to reside within the school district where he/she was employed.

Preferences of One's Direct Employer (PRE) measured the degree to which hiring officials considered the wishes of their direct employers, such as superintendents or school boards, when selecting personnel.

Personal Knowledge of the Applicant (PER) focused upon how important hiring officials felt it was for them to have personal knowledge of an applicant before hiring them.

Personal Recommendation from a Trusted Friend (REC) measured the extent to which hiring officials rely upon personal recommendations from a trusted friend when selecting personnel.

Applicant Background (BACK) measured the degree to which hiring officials considered an applicant's background an important factor in making a selection decision.

Demographic Variables

The following variables measure various demographic factors likely to impact

school district personnel selection practices:

> School District Size (SIZE) was the total student population of the district. Districts with a population of fewer than 3,000 students were considered small; those with 3,000 or more large. This information was obtained from the Kentucky Department of Education.
>
> Community Racial Composition (CRC) was the degree of homogeneity present in target communities. A community with 90% or more of its residents categorized in one racial group was classified as racially homogenous; those with under 90% were categorized as racially diverse. This information was obtained from the United States Census.
>
> Decision-Maker's Position (DMP) referred to the hiring officials' position in the organizational hierarchy. Decision-makers were classified according to their job titles, which were self-reported.
>
> Decision-Maker's Background (DMB) measured whether a decision-maker considered him or herself to be from a primarily rural or primarily urban background.
>
> Metropolitan Classification (MC) measured the degree of rurality of the school district. The information on classifying school districts as metropolitan or nonmetropolitan was obtained from the United States Department of Education using the Office of Management and Budget's definition of metropolitan.

Data Analysis

A first step in data analysis is the computation of frequencies and all descriptive variables. After tabulation of the descriptive data, the research questions, which sought to determine the degree of relationships among single independent and dependent variables, were analyzed using bivariate correlation. The results are contained in correlation matrices for each of the subsections for Research Questions 1 & 2. In each instance for the five subsections, the independent variable is the combined rural values construct while the dependent variable is represented by a series of indicators for each respective construct. Analyzing the relationship of each of the dependent variables to rural values separately allows for more detailed and easily interpretable data. Analyzing

the Candidate Fit Factor variables together, for instance, would produce an overall picture with limited interpretability. Considering the relationship of each dependent variable separately gives more specific data about exactly which of the candidate fit factors are most related to rural values and which are not. The same is true for the other constructs of personnel selection in the model. Because this study is exploratory in nature, the information obtained from a bivariate correlation is appropriate.

It should be noted that correlational data are non-directional, and the data base for this study (cross-sectional) does not admit of causal determinations. The designations for independent and dependent variable are taken from the theoretical framework (see Figure 1). However, the reader should remember that the study is exploratory and no claims for causality are made--only that within the context of the conceptual model, the directionality is plausible.

Data Screening

Any legitimate analysis of statistical data must include procedures for screening data. First, the data were inspected for accuracy of input, paying careful attention to check for out-of-range values, plausible means, and standard deviations. The authors also evaluated the amount and distribution of missing data. A large amount of missing data disqualified a survey from analysis. Only one survey, where the respondent failed to return the values scale portion of the questionnaire, was disqualified. If only a small amount of data was missing from a returned survey, then the mean score for that particular question was inserted to facilitate analysis, a conservative correction.

Other data screening procedures also occurred. Evaluation of assumptions of linearity, normality, multicollinearity or singularity, and homogeneity of variance-

covariance matrices revealed no threat to multivariate analysis. During completion of the data screening, no problems were detected.

Results

Research Question 1

This research question was answered by correlating respondents' scores on the Rural Values Scale with their responses on items from the Personnel Selection Practices Survey. All 40 Rural Values Scale items were collapsed into one score. Eight variables representing credential preferences, six variables representing district hiring perceptions, and six variables representing recruitment efforts were correlated with rural values scores to reveal whether there was a relationship between item responses and rural values, as well as the nature (positive or negative) and magnitude (low, moderate, or high) of the relationship. For clarity, each set of variables and their relationship to rural values is presented separately.

Interpreting the magnitude of a correlation can sometimes be a subjective exercise (Williams, 1992). It is, therefore, almost a necessity to have some consistency of terminology when describing a correlation coefficient (Bodenman, 1995). Thus, for the purposes of this study, Guilford's (1956, p. 145) guide for evaluating correlation coefficients was followed:

< .20 (slight correlation; almost negligible relationship)
.20-.40 (low correlation; definite but small relationship)
.40-.70 (moderate correlation; substantial relationship)
.70-.90 (high correlation; marked relationship)
> .90 (very high correlation; dependable relationship)

Research Question 1a (Credential Preferences)

A Pearson r was calculated to determine the relationship between the degree of rural

values a decision-maker possesses (as measured by his/her score on the Rural Values Scale) and certain credential preferences (as measured by items 1, 3, 4, 6, 11, 12, 13, and 15 in Section I of the Personnel Selection Practices Survey). The credential variables were references listed on application (REF), previous experience outside the school district (EXPO), grade point average (GPA), level of educational attainment (EDU), certification in more than one area (CER), involvement in leadership activities (LEAD), previous honors and/or awards (HON), and applicant intention to coach or sponsor extracurricular activities (SPON). These variables measured the extent to which decision-makers considered certain qualities when making hiring decisions.

The results can be found in Table 1. They indicated that the possession of a high degree of rural values correlated strongly with many of the credential preferences, some positively and some negatively. Rural values had a high negative correlation with REF, $r = -.75$, $p < .01$. The higher the degree of rural values a decision-maker possessed, the less importance he/she placed upon references when selecting new employees. High negative correlations were also found between rural values and GPA ($r = -.79$, $p < .01$), LEAD ($r = -.77$, $p < .01$), and HON ($r = -.78$, $p < .01$). A low negative correlation ($r = -.32$, $p < .01$) existed between rural values and EXPO. Rural values did correlate positively with SPON ($r = .31$, $p < .01$) and CER ($r = .47$, $p < .01$), although the former correlation would be classified as low while the latter was only moderate in strength.

Significant relationships were also found among the eight credential preferences variables. Specifically, high positive correlations were found between REF, GPA, EDU, LEAD, and HON. Perhaps it is not coincidence that these variables are correlated, since they are all attempts in some way to quantify an applicant's attributes.

Table 1

Correlations between Rural Values and Credential Preferences Variables

Variable	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
1. RV	--	-.75	-.32	-.79	-.70	.47	-.77	-.78	.30
2. REF		--	.30	.76	.68	-.36	.67	.73	-.13
3. EXPO			--	.33	.30	-.08	.33	.35	.06
4. GPA				--	.80	-.41	.78	.82	.28
5. EDU					--	-.32	.76	.78	-.11
6. CER						--	-.26	-.31	.51
7. LEAD							--	.86	-.10
8. HON								--	-.13
9. SPON									--

Note. RV = rural values; Preference Variables = references (REF), previous experience outside the school district (EXPO), grade point average (GPA), level of educational attainment (EDU), multiple certification (CER), involvement in leadership activities (LEAD), previous honors and awards (HON), and sponsoring extracurricular activities (SPON). All correlation coefficients were significant at $p < .01$.

Research Question 1b (District Hiring Perceptions)

A Pearson r was calculated to determine the relationship between the degree of rural values decision-makers possess (as measured by their score on the Rural Values Scale) and the perceptions they hold concerning their roles and responsibilities as hiring officials (as measured by items 2, 3, 4, 6, 7, and 9 in Section II of the Personnel Selection Practices Survey). These items were as follows: average competent individuals who will remain in a job for a long period of time are preferable to exceptional individuals who may leave after only a few years (LENGTH); establishing racial diversity is a consideration when making hiring decisions (RACDIV); part of my responsibility as a

representative of the community is to consider community norms and values when making hiring decisions (NORMS); teachers who have exceptional intellectual abilities do not relate as well to most students as teachers who were average students themselves (INTEL); minorities should be represented on school faculties proportional to their representation in the school district population (MINOR); and applications and resumes which are mailed rather than hand delivered to the school district are rarely called in for interviews (HAND).

Table 2

Correlations between Rural Values and District Hiring Perception Variables

Variable	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
1. RV	--	.80	-.77	.68	.80	-.34	.78
2. LENGTH		--	-.66	.53	.69	-.28	.66
3. RACDIV			--	-.52	-.67	.35	-.66
4. NORMS				--	.51	-.33	.48
5. INTEL					--	-.28	.66
6. MINOR						--	-.25
7. HAND							--

Note. RV = rural values; Perception Variables = projected length of employment (LENGTH), racial diversity (RACDIV), community norms (NORMS), intelligence (INTEL), minority representation (MINOR), and hand-delivery (HAND). All correlation coefficients were significant at $p < .01$.

The results, which are displayed in Table 2, indicate high positive correlations between rural values and HAND ($r = .78$, $p < .01$), LENGTH ($r = .80$, $p < .01$), and INTEL ($r = .80$, $p < .01$). A moderate positive correlation was found between rural values and NORMS ($r = .68$, $p < .01$). A high negative relationship was found between rural values and RACDIV ($r = -.76$, $p < .01$), while rural values and MINOR showed a

low negative relationship ($r = -.34$, $p < .01$).

The perceptions variables showed a strong intervariable relationship. The variables of LENGTH, HAND, and INTEL were positively correlated with one another, yet negatively correlated with RACDIV and MINOR. Considering that RACDIV and MINOR are dealing with similar concepts that represent a disruption of closed homogeneity in a small rural community, such a finding was expected.

Research Question 1c (Recruitment)

Another Pearson r was calculated to determine the relationship between the degree of rural values decision-makers possessed (as measured by their score on the Rural Values Scale) and their district's recruitment of personnel (as measured by items 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, and 6, in Section III of the Personnel Selection Practices Survey). These items were as follows: special incentive packages (INCEN); out of district position advertising (ADVER); public relations materials detailing the advantages of employment in the district (PUBREL); sending recruiters to colleges or employment fairs (RECRUIT); none (NONE); and other (OTHER).

Table 3 shows the results of the bivariate correlation. There is a negative correlation between rural values and all six recruitment variables. The results for INCEN ($r = -.04$, $p = .61$) and OTHER ($r = -.08$, $p = .23$) were not statistically significant. Frequencies show there was not enough variation in responses to produce reliable data. Interestingly, rural values had a moderate negative correlation with NONE ($r = -.58$, $p < .01$).

Table 3

Correlations between Rural Values and Recruitment Efforts Variables

Variable	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
1. RV	--	-.04	-.56*	-.32*	-.55*	-.58*	-.08
2. INCEN		--	-.03	.05	.12	.06	-.02
3. ADVER			--	.26*	.35*	.81*	.15
4. PUBREL				--	.46*	.37*	.10
5. RECRUIT					--	.50*	.11
6. NONE						--	.12
7. OTHER							--

Note. RV = rural values; Recruitment Variables = special incentive packages (INCEN), out-of-district position advertising (ADVER), public relations materials (PUBREL), sending recruiters to colleges or employment fairs (RECRUIT), other (OTHER), and none (NONE).
*$p < .01$.

Research Question 2

This question has two subsections. For both, respondents' scores on the four Rural Values scales (collapsed into a single value for this study) were correlated with the tacit fit filters--Community Fit Perceptions and Candidate Fit Factors, respectively (see Figure 1). Community Fit Perceptions, hiring officials' sense of the role or importance of "fit" in the hiring process, includes four variables. The seven Candidate Fit Factors represent the hiring officials' judgments of the candidates: do they possess the idiosyncratic local characteristics necessary to fit into the district.

Research Question 2a (Community Fit Perceptions)

To determine the relationship between the degree of rural values possessed by decision-makers and their "community fit," a Pearson r was calculated. Rural values

were measured by a decision-maker's score on the Rural Values Scale. Community Fit Perceptions, which are decision-makers' perceptions of the role of fit in the hiring process, were measured by items 1, 5, 8, and 10 in Section II of the Personnel Selection Practices Survey. The community fit perception items were as follows: teachers and administrators are more effective when they share a similar background with their colleagues (SIMBAC); screening procedures for selecting personnel should be designed to keep out candidates whose values/attitudes do not match those of the school district (SCREEN); students relate better to teachers who share a background and possess values and beliefs similar to their own (SIMVAL); and it is important to select personnel who will fit into a community or school district (FIT).

Rural values had a high positive correlation with SIMBAC ($r = .82$, $p < .01$); SCREEN ($r = .81$, $p < .01$); SIMVAL ($r = .75$, $p < .01$); and FIT ($r = .77$, $p < .01$). Thus, the higher the degree of rural values a decision-maker possessed, the more likely he/she was to hold positive perceptions of the role of fit in the hiring process. Not surprisingly, there are high positive correlations among the four community fit variables. As all are measuring a different facet of an overall construct, it is logical to assume a strong relationship would exist. In other words, a decision-maker who holds one community fit perception would most likely hold the others as well. (See Table 4 for a display of the correlations associated with this research question.)

Table 4

Correlations between Rural Values and Community Fit Perceptions Variables

Variable	1	2	3	4	5
1. RV	--	.82	.81	.75	.78
2. SIMBAC		--	.70	.68	.67
3. SCREEN			--	.74	.65
4. SIMVAL				--	.61
5. HAND					--

Note. RV = rural values; Fit Perceptions Variables = similar backgrounds (SIMBAC), screening (SCREEN), similar values (SIMVAL), and fit (FIT). All correlation coefficients were significant at $p < .01$.

Research Question 2b (Candidate Fit Factors)

A final Pearson r was calculated to determine the relationship between the degree of rural values a decision-maker possesses (as measured by his/her score on the Rural Values Scale) and candidate fit (as measured by items 2, 5, 7, 8, 9,10, and 14 in Section I of the Personnel Selection Practices Survey). The Candidate Fit Factors variables were previous employment experience in the school district (EXPI), familiarity with the local school system and/or community (FAM), intention of the applicant to reside within the county/district (INT), preferences of school board members (PRE), personal knowledge you have of the applicant (PER), personal recommendation by current employee or trusted friend (REC), and applicant background (BACK). These variables measured the importance decision-makers placed upon candidates fitting in when making hiring decisions.

The results, which can be found in Table 5, indicate positive correlations between rural values and all seven candidate fit variables. A high positive correlation existed

between rural values and FAM ($r = .81$, $p < .01$), INT ($r = .74$, $p < .01$), PRE ($r = .79$, $p < .01$), PER ($r = .75$, $p < .01$), and BACK ($r = .76$, $p < .01$). A moderate positive correlation also existed between rural values and EXPI ($r = .48$, $p < .01$) and REC ($r = .69$, $p < .01$). Correlations among the candidate fit variables were also found, indicating a relationship did exist among the items. Again, since all deal with personal networking or ties to the target school district, their relationship was an expected outcome.

Table 5

Correlations between Rural Values and Candidate Fit Factors Variables

Variable	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
1. RV	--	.48	.81	.74	.79	.75	.69	.76
2. EXPI		--	.51	.45	.42	.56	.51	.47
3. FAM			--	.74	.76	.71	.64	.73
4. INT				--	.69	.71	.66	.72
5. PRE					--	.65	.57	.65
6. PER						--	.80	.76
7. REC							--	.75
8. BACK								--

Note. RV = rural values; Fit Factor Variables = previous experience inside the district (EXPI), familiarity with the local school district or community (FAM), intention of the applicant to reside within the district (INT), preferences of one's direct employer (PRE), personal knowledge of the applicant (PER), recommendation from a trusted friend (REC), and applicant background (BACK). All correlation coefficients were significant at $p < .01$.

Discussion

Research Question 1

Research Question 1 sought to determine the relationship between rural values and

the personnel selection components--credential preferences, district hiring perceptions, and recruitment efforts--of Kentucky public school hiring officials. Credential preferences were those criteria deemed most important by decision-makers when choosing personnel; district hiring perceptions were the ways in which decision-makers viewed their roles and responsibilities as hiring officials; finally, recruitment efforts dealt with the manner in which school districts actively sought teaching candidates.

Because of the very nature of the rural values targeted by this study, it is not surprising that a clear pattern of responses emerged. The current research shows that the higher decision-makers' levels of rural values, the more they rely upon "matching" or fit factors when making hiring decisions. Objective factors, such as references, grade point average, leadership activities, and honors or awards, did not play a significant role in influencing the hiring decisions of individuals with rural values.

Such factors would seem to be important for determining "universal fit," or how well an applicant fits with one's ideal conception of an employee. They are irrelevant, however, in determining how well an applicant's values might match with his/her employer. In other words, they do little to help determine "idiosyncratic fit," or the particular type of fit of interest in this study. These more objective factors, moreover, are ones that can be measured and clear delineations among qualifications drawn. These results seem to confirm that decision-makers with rural values prefer to rely upon personal networking, community standards, and other less quantifiable factors when selecting personnel.

Interestingly, the results of this study indicate that although decision-makers with rural values did consider multiple certification and intention to sponsor or coach an

extracurricular activity when selecting personnel, neither factor seemed to be given very high import. Thus, although the findings of Herbster (1982) and Springfield (1982) are supported, the support is tenuous at best. The best explanation for this finding may be that although these two elements are considerations, they only become important when placed in context with other, more essential, factors.

The results in the areas of district hiring perceptions and recruitment efforts offer equally intriguing points for discussion. Analysis seems to indicate a noticeable antipathy among decision-makers with strong rural values toward using hiring to establish diversity. Based upon the results of this study, decision-makers with rural values do not perceive the necessity of having minority faculty representation equal to the student population, even though they strongly support the perception that students relate better to teachers with similar value systems. The possession of rural values also seems to decrease decision-makers' perceptions that establishing racial diversity should be a consideration when making hiring decisions.

A caveat is necessary here. The data base for this study was primarily rural, small, and predominantly white (i.e., homogeneous) school districts. There is the possibility that a more diverse population would be less parochial, although that could not be tested here.

The evidence discovered by the analysis of school district recruitment efforts seems to corroborate the notion that decision-makers with rural values are not actively pursuing minority teaching candidates. Even though recruitment of minority teacher candidates is mandated by KRS 161.750, the results of this study show that 28% of the decision-makers reported that their districts do no recruitment at all. This finding raises serious

questions about the veracity of the documents school districts must submit to the Kentucky Department of Education each year confirming their minority recruitment.

Clearly, such findings should cause alarm. No one wants to believe that chief hiring officials are making judgments based upon prejudicial thinking. There is certainly nothing in this study to indicate that such is the case. There is no evidence that decision-makers with rural values harbor prejudicial ideas or purposefully avoid hiring minorities based upon race. What is supported by the data, however, is the strong and guiding belief that individuals must "fit" into the value system of the school district and community. In this study, for example, fully three-fourths of the school districts surveyed were in racially homogenous communities. Chances are great that the many area-specific criteria used by hiring officials to gain a perception of "fit" would usually exclude the minority candidate.

Research Question 2a

This research question analyzed the relationship between the possession of rural values and the Community Fit Perceptions held by chief hiring officials. As a construct, community fit perceptions measured how decision-makers perceived the role of fit in the hiring process. The results of this analysis provide solid evidence that decision-makers with rural values perceive "fit" as a necessary prerequisite to employment. The combination of the four community fit items clearly shows that, based upon their perception of their hiring responsibilities, decision-makers with rural values quite often rely upon an implicit policy of fit to guide their hiring decisions. Applicant background seems to be one of the key elements in determining that "fit." Local candidates, therefore, would seem to be among the only applicants who would meet the stringent

"similar background" test.

The use of idiosyncratic or "similar to me" fit for decision-makers with rural values would seem to contradict the research of Bretz, Rynes, and Gerhart (1993), who found more emphasis on universal or "similar to ideal" fit among employers. Their research, however, did not attempt to distinguish between groups of decision-makers and, most certainly, did not take employer values into account. The results of this study are, however, entirely consistent with the body of literature available on rural values. The loyalty to community, mistrust of strangers, resistance to change, and conservative tendencies found among individuals with rural values would seem the perfect breeding ground to give rise to the implicit policy of fit.

Other relevant research in the field of person-organization fit does confirm the results of this study. Daniel Cable (1995) found that fit judgments which affected hiring decisions were regulated by perceived value congruence. Applicant background, in the absence of other value information, could serve as a prime indicator of values congruence. Many other researchers agree that P-O fit may play a larger role in the selection process, once qualifications have been established (e.g., Adkins, Russel, & Webel, 1994; Kristof, 1996). Thus, when selecting among educational personnel, all who have equivalent certification, it is not unknown for judgments of fit to be used as the basis for employment decisions.

Perhaps the mere fact that many chief hiring officials in rural communities perceive their constituents as highly reluctant to change is a contributing factor to their reliance on an implicit policy of fit. After all, either through direct evaluation or pressure from school board members, education administrators must eventually face the consequences

of making decisions counter to what the community demands (Little, 1996).

It is no secret that superintendent positions, especially in rural Kentucky, can have a high turn-over rate. Results from an earlier qualitative study can be construed to support the findings of this study. In the earlier study, superintendents indicated a fear of upsetting community norms (Little, 1996). Each interviewee, in fact, could recall specific instances of superintendents who lost their jobs by making decisions which ran contrary to community values. The overall idea, then, that decision-makers should consider the preferences of school board members and serve as a representative of community values, as found in this study, has a firm base in reality. For school administrators, adhering to these practices could be even more than a matter of personal values. It could be a matter of professional survival. These conclusions are quite consistent with those of Logsdon (1988).

Research Question 2b

The final research question analyzed the relationship between rural values and the importance decision-makers place upon various candidate fit factors. The Candidate Fit Factor variables measured the extent to which hiring officials deemed it important for candidates to possess various fit factors. Candidate Fit represents those indicators that bespeak a high degree of applicant similarity with the organization or community.

The results support the earlier conclusion that rural values lead decision-makers to rely upon perceptions of fit when selecting personnel. High positive correlations were found between rural values and all seven selected candidate fit factors. Most relevant is the fact that all seven factors could be classified as area-specific criteria. In other words, applicants who lived in and were highly familiar with the target school district could meet

the candidate fit criteria. Individuals from outside the area would be placed at a distinct disadvantage.

Research findings by Adkins et al. (1994) lend credence to the results of the current study. When a job applicant's values are perceived to be congruent to those of the employing organization, then the individual's overall appearance of "fitting" into the organization, and, hence, his/her general employability is enhanced. Lacking any solid evidence verifying applicant values, it is reasonable that employers searching for confirmation of fit would consider those factors--such as applicant background, familiarity with the local school system or community, personal knowledge of the applicant, intention to reside with the community, personal recommendations from a current employee or trusted friend, and previous employment experience in the school district--designated as candidate fit factors in this study.

Research indicating that employee-employer "match" forms the basis for positive judgments about individuals provides additional validation of the results of this study (Chatman, 1991). Clearly, the factors preferred by decision-makers with rural values are those that would be most likely to help him/her select personnel who also possessed rural values. Again, the method is certainly not foolproof, but it is the perception of the match, more so than the actual matching of values, that influences the employment decision.

Future Research Implications

Considering that quality educators are so vital for student achievement and diversity so necessary for organizational growth, additional investigation into the factors influencing final hiring decisions, especially the influence of values, is warranted. This foray into a largely unexplored area of the educational arena leaves many questions

unanswered and the area ripe for more examination. More in-depth study is required to pinpoint the extent of variations in the hiring process. Further research is also needed to lead to the development of objective criteria for personnel selection in education.

Research into the area of rural values and organizational culture would also be of worth. For educators and business leaders alike, knowing which factors combine to develop an organization's culture would prove to be quite useful information. Similarly, this study raises a legitimate question concerning the difference between community and organizational culture. In fact, one could replicate this same study with the emphasis on organizational culture rather than rural values and gain collateral insight.

A related issue is how rural values relate to an individual school's learning climate. School effectiveness research has shown that school learning climate varies significantly with concomitant results (e.g., Miller, 1992). What researchers do not know, however, is why some schools have better learning climates than others. Values may provide part of that elusive answer. Additionally, it would be valuable to know whether or not there are school level sets of rural values that affect achievement norms. All these areas are ones which certainly warrant future study.

According to all evidence uncovered by this study, rural values do indeed correlate highly with both personnel selection practices and tacit filters. Although that influence has a negative cast, the causality of that conclusion is beyond the scope of this study. Perhaps the most immediate need for future study is an examination of the outcomes of various personnel selection practices. In other words, it would be of great value to research the types of individuals actually hired by decision-makers with rural values. Through a variety of methods--including credential analysis to examine the consistency

of the final hire with the various "fit" filters discussed here, as well as objective assessment of teaching prowess and measures of student achievement--data could be gathered to provide evidence of the consequences of selected personnel selection practices. Those consequences, after all, represent the ultimate information regarding the efficacy of educators' hiring decisions.

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